

Voters to decide if Benton Co. seat should move

By John Trumbo, Herald staff writer

KENNEWICK — It took more than four years and a whole lot of wrangling, but retired judge Fred Staples' petition drive to have Benton County voters decide if Kennewick should be the county seat will be on the Nov. 2 ballot.

County commissioners agreed Monday to put the question on the ballot after finding Staples had presented enough petition signatures. Commissioners Jim Beaver and Max Benitz Jr. supported the resolution, with Leo Bowman out of town on county business.

The ballot proposition, which will be titled "Removal of County Seat," will ask voters if Kennewick should replace Prosser as the seat of county government.

Staples filed 23,633 signatures on his petitions, which was well over the 13,684 needed to qualify for the ballot. State law required valid signatures equal to at least one-third of the number of votes cast in the November 2009 election, when 41,050 votes were cast.

Staples first suggested in 1984 the county seat should move from Prosser to Kennewick because most of the county's employees were working out of Kennewick. But a public vote that year fell short of the required 60 percent supermajority.

Disappointed but not daunted, the retired Superior Court judge redoubled his efforts with a new petition drive in 2006.

Staples, who will write the ballot argument favoring the county seat move, insists relocation is needed because the county seat should be where the population center is in the county. He also says the county seat already has in effect been moved because most county offices are in Kennewick.

"It is vitally important that the people of Benton County have an opportunity to decide where the county seat is going to be located," said Benitz, whose District 2 includes Prosser. He noted that the county seat has been in Prosser for 107 years and that the courthouse is a focus of community pride and listed on the National Historic Register.

Commissioners have hired a consultant from Seattle to prepare a cost analysis on what the financial impact would be of moving the county seat. The analysis, which is required by law, will consider the cost for the county, the cities of Prosser and Kennewick, and the financial effect on county employees who will see their place of employment move 36 miles to Kennewick.

The county sheriff, assessor, auditor, treasurer and clerk maintain offices in Prosser at the courthouse complex, while also keeping offices at either the county annex on Canal Drive in Kennewick or at the Benton County Justice Center on Grandridge Boulevard.

A League of Women Voters study done in 2008 found that about 80 percent of the county's employees were working in Kennewick.

Benitz said at a commission meeting in March that even if all the county offices in Prosser moved to Kennewick the county would have to maintain the courthouse as a public building.

County Administrator David Sparks told commissioners last month when they were choosing a consultant to help them answer questions about relocating the county seat that this was a first in Washington. "We know of only one other county in the nation that has done this, and it's in Georgia," he said.

The consultant, Entrix, expects to have its report ready for the commissioners in mid-August. It also will prepare a voters pamphlet with answers to frequently asked questions about the issue.

Read more: <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2010/07/20/1098510/voters-will-decide-if-benton-county.html#ixzz0uFGeHa5D>